

Literacy Instruction and Social Justice: Disciplinary Literacy as a Tool for Disrupting Inequities

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Current political and social climates have pushed conversations about equity and inclusion to the forefront. At the same time, lawmakers in more than half of US states are pushing legislation that would limit discussion of these issues in schools. Educators must consider the best ways to continue conversations of equity and inclusion without drawing negative attention that could silence them. Disciplinary literacy centers inquiry, collaboration, academic vocabulary, and rhetorical reading, and is one method through which teachers can continue instruction in content and critical thinking while presenting students with opportunities to develop agency and social justice across disciplines.

Introduction

As conversations about inclusivity and diversity have increased globally, educators have continued to engage students in these topics. As laws that limit discussions of race, gender, and privilege in schools are enacted across the US, teachers must look to authentic and integrated instructional methods to provide students with opportunities for considering multiple perspectives on issues of equity and inclusion. Drawing on best practices that naturally evoke these opportunities is important for all educators, and we must continue to educate preservice teachers on not only best practices in teaching but also how those best practices support educational goals of equity, agency, and social justice. The integration of disciplinary literacy in everyday classroom instruction provides one such opportunity.

Disciplinary Literacy “recognizes that reading, writing, thinking, reasoning, and doing within each discipline is unique—and leads to the understanding that every field of study creates, communicates, and evaluates knowledge differently” (Lent, 2016, p.1). By its very nature, disciplinary literacy is positioned to support equitable literacy instruction through the analysis and

deconstruction of the language, texts, and actions particular to each discipline and through an invitation extended to all “students to join the disciplinary field itself” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014, p. 629). Disciplinary literacy provides opportunities for equitable, inclusive literacy instruction within and across the disciplines and across all grade levels.

Theoretical Perspective(s) Critical Pedagogy

It is imperative that students are given opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. Friere (1970) encouraged educators to use critical pedagogy by challenging students to question power structures and social inequities. He argued for problem-posing education that supports the development of critical consciousness in students. Today, the use of critical pedagogy in classrooms provides students with the skills and vocabulary to challenge the narratives they confront daily in school texts as well as on cable news networks and social media. According to Uddin (2019), “Enhancing students’ critical awareness is a goal of education, and teachers are the most crucial adults to guide students and can make them enthusiastic about learning for life” (p.118).

However, Kaya and Kaya (2017) found that “Prospective teachers’ tendencies to Critical Pedagogy approach is not satisfactory...More opportunities may be created within the curriculum with an aim of improving Critical Pedagogy perspectives of prospective teachers” (p. 187). Using a critical pedagogy framework, teachers challenge students to consider real world issues and to generate understanding, agency, and social justice. Educators must provide current and preservice teachers’ opportunities to engage with and integrate critical pedagogy in their instruction through professional development on a wide range of strategies, including disciplinary literacy.

Disciplinary literacy is a natural companion to critical pedagogy because it invites students to study a discipline in an authentic way which forces them to analyze the privilege, oppression, and origins inherent in discipline-specific language and practices. As students engage with discipline-specific texts, teachers should guide them through the analysis of power, perspective, and social equity (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Students’ development of critical thinking and agency is supported through the analysis and critique of discipline-specific texts, language, and practices.

Antiracist Reading Practices

According to Inoue (2020), “central to an antiracist reading practice is understanding White language supremacy and how all readers and texts participate in it, even as some struggle against it” (p.1). Likewise, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019), propose that antiracist literature instruction be used “as a framework teachers can use to carry out literature-based units that make teaching about race and racism a deliberate and systematic part of the curriculum in White-dominant schools” (p. 3). Antiracist reading practices call for the use of analysis

and dialogue to uncover socially constructed inequities by reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Likewise, disciplinary literacy calls teachers to consider not only the discipline-specific texts, skills, and practices but also their implications. Guiding students through critical analysis of texts within each discipline generates opportunities for students to discover historical and social contexts and to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which inequities are embedded in the disciplines.

Literacy Instruction for Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice

Disciplinary literacy is “a democratic approach to learning” which promotes an investigative and real-world-focused approach to learning in the content areas. Instead of focusing on rote facts, disciplinary literacy often considers how students might use evidence and artifacts in each discipline to develop their own conclusions and relate their learning to real-life settings. (Colwell, et al., 2020, p. 5).

While disciplinary literacy has been a focus in literacy education for several decades, its potential as a tool for equitable, inclusive literacy instruction has never been of more value than in this moment of social unrest around issues of equity and the corresponding attempts across 28 states, including a large number southern/southeastern states, to limit discussion of race in schools (Stout & LeMee, 2021). As this trend continues, educators must be prepared to continue facilitating critical thinking and analysis of these important issues without drawing negative attention from parents, administrators, and/or lawmakers.

Disciplinary literacy is one method by which teachers can accomplish this.

Disciplinary literacy connects several components of literacy instruction and critical pedagogy. Disciplinary literacy calls on students to understand the distinct reading, writing, listening, and communication skills and practices within each discipline and to incorporate “inquiry and collaboration in discipline-specific ways” (Lent & Voigt, 2019, p. 41). Disciplinary literacy, therefore, draws on the inquiry, collaboration, discussion, and critique that are common to critical pedagogy while also informing students about the literacies within and across disciplines.

Teachers should “think carefully about passing along disciplinary literacy skills and habits while also thinking critically about them” (Lent & Voigt, 2019, p. 159). In order to guide students in discipline-specific studies, teachers must devote time to identifying discipline-specific literacy skills and practices and to examining them critically. Students should be guided through the process of asking ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions about discipline-specific skills and practices in addition to the larger topics and issues these disciplines study. Furthermore, within the disciplinary literacy framework, teachers should also critically examine their plans/instruction to make sure they are reaching all students, which Colwell et al. (2020) argue “may offer important opportunities to deliberately connect to students’ cultural backgrounds and intellectual differences” (p. 38).

Rhetorical Reading is also a natural component of disciplinary literacy. According to Warren (2013), rhetorical reading provides students with opportunities to see texts as authored pieces and to move beyond a binary/dualistic approach to texts. Students who hold a dualistic approach to text and knowledge believe that there is a right and a wrong, a true and a false answer

that can be found. As students move toward a relativistic view of texts and knowledge through rhetorical reading, they recognize that “not all areas of knowledge are absolute” and they “analyze concepts and ideas more fully, often using Authority to support generalizations they eventually reach after systematic exploration” (Anson, 1989, p. 336). Students, therefore, become more critically empowered readers as they develop rhetorical reading skills that allow them to determine not only what the texts say but also whether they agree with them. A rhetoric of reading must:

account not only for the proximate goal of perceiving another person's meanings, but also the ultimate goal of updating a belief system or worldview, a theory about the way the world operates and about the way in which the believer can and should operate within it... The process of reading, then, is not just the interpretation of a text but the interpretation of another person's worldview as presented by a text. (Brent, 1992, p. 21).

Rhetorical reading provides students with the framework by which to critically interact with texts. Further, in her reader response theory, Rosenblatt (1995) suggests that readers should revisit/reread texts because their transactions with texts will change as their experiences and understandings of the world grow. Therefore, students should be taught to read rhetorically and repetitively within the disciplinary literacy framework.

Academic Language Instruction is another key component of disciplinary literacy and “has the potential to ensure more equitable access to disciplinary practices, as it fosters common understandings of disciplinary vocabulary and language structure without relying primarily on students’ prior knowledge or experiences”

(Colwell, et al., 2020, p.14). Recognizing language patterns within and across disciplines requires knowledge of both discipline-specific vocabulary and ways of communicating. Students who learn how texts are organized and constructed in the disciplines develop a stronger ability to understand and critique these practices. Furthermore, understanding of academic language is essential in using discipline-specific digital tools which can support the development of disciplinary literacy.

Conclusion

Disciplinary literacy invites students to join the fields of each discipline and to examine the practices and origins therein. Students, as insiders, position themselves to gain access to disciplines and their unique ways of reading, writing, listening, and communicating, and they use inquiry and rhetorical reading to challenge oppressive elements and work toward social justice. This process leads students to the development of critical consciousness, conscientization, or conscientização (Freire, 1970). Likewise, this process produces social justice (Moje, 2007).

Amid the current political and social climate across the globe and the efforts in at least 28 states across the US to block discussion of race, gender, and other issues of equity and inclusion in schools, teachers must be trained to use instructional methods such as disciplinary literacy to continue the development of critical thinking skills around issues of equity, inclusion and social justice while developing knowledge of discipline-specific literacies. Current and preservice teachers should be given opportunities to engage in and design instruction that includes a disciplinary literacy framework that integrates inquiry, real-world issues and approaches, collaboration, rhetorical reading, and academic vocabulary instruction.

Together, these elements position disciplinary literacy as an approach to literacy instruction that allows critical conversations about equity and inclusion to continue and provides the context necessary for students to develop agency and work toward social justice.

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